

VZCZCXRO8411
PP RUEHAG RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHKUK RUEHROV
DE RUEHLB #0691/01 1371258
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 171258Z MAY 07
FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 8201
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO 1106
RHMFISS/CDR USCENCOM MACDILL AFB FL
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 000691

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/MARCHESE/HARDING

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/16/2017

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [LE](#)

SUBJECT: LEBANON: PATRIARCH SFEIR DISMISSES POPULAR
ELECTIONS, PROPOSES CARETAKER CABINET

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman. Reason: Sections 1.4 (b)
) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) In a May 15 meeting with visiting NEA A/S Welch and the Ambassador, Maronite Patriarch Sfeir -- commemorating his 87th birthday on the same day -- reported that his rare visit to President Emile Lahoud the previous week was to warn against Lahoud's appointment of a second cabinet. Lahoud did not respond. Sfeir mused about the possibility for a small technocratic cabinet to maintain authority in Lebanon until presidential elections could be held on time in the fall. As for presidential candidates, Sfeir again gave no names, but explained that presidential candidate Michel Aoun retains support among Christians who had feel worried about their status. Sfeir said that instituting popular election of the President is "impossible" and, because of extensive Christian emigration out of Lebanon, would not produce results in Aoun's favor. Lastly, Sfeir demonstrated visible distaste for the idea of dispatching a Vatican envoy to Lebanon. End Summary.

SFEIR'S PROPOSAL FOR LAHOUD

¶2. (C) Chuckling in response to A/S Welch's comment about Sfeir's recent "very interesting meeting", the Patriarch explained that he felt it was his "duty" to visit President Lahoud on May 11. Suggesting that the idea emerged from the Maronite Bishops' Council, Sfeir noted his trip to Baabda was a natural escalation of his previous two messages to Lahoud: At the Christmas 2005 mass, the Patriarch advised Lahoud from the pulpit that he hoped the President would have the wisdom to quit the presidency. Also, several months ago, Sfeir wrote a letter, conveyed by a bishop, to the president expressing the same wishes in more explicit terms.

¶3. (C) Sfeir emphasized to Lahoud the danger of a two-government situation, a situation that would be dangerous for Lebanon and for Lahoud himself. Lahoud did not respond to Sfeir's counsel not to appoint a second cabinet that would be considered illegitimate by the world and that would split the country. Citing a four-minister precedent from the 1950s, Sfeir mused about the possibility of a compromise political maneuver to Lahoud: that a small technocratic cabinet be formed to run the country until presidential elections can be held as anticipated in the fall.

¶4. (C) According to Sfeir, Lahoud's response to the temporary

technocratic cabinet was "times have changed," a response that suggests Lahoud was not on board with the proposal. Lahoud offered no other responses to Sfeir's points, and Sfeir admitted that the president "has his own ideas." Sfeir, however, said the two had had a good visit overall and Lahoud appeared to listen to the Patriarch's views, even if he did not agree with them all.

THE PRESIDENCY AND AOUN'S "IMPOSSIBLE" PLAN

15. (C) Sfeir reiterated his calls for a president who is equidistant from the March 14 Coalition and March 8 opposition, explaining that a president tied to one group will not be accepted by the other group. Sfeir said he avoids mentioning names of potential candidates because of the sensitivity of the issue of the president among Christians in Lebanon. Responding to A/S Welch's statement that the next president of Lebanon should not take instructions from outside actors, Sfeir agreed. He commented that Syrian influence in the country, was "very difficult." Although Syrian troops are gone, Damascus maintains influence in Lebanese politics. As an example of Syrian involvement in Lebanese affairs, Sfeir described the transfer of Syrian arms to some parties in Lebanon.

16. (C) A/S Welch, the Ambassador, and Sfeir then discussed the one Christian who has been extremely outspoken about his aspirations for the presidency, Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) leader General Michel Aoun. Sfeir declared that Aoun's recent insistence on a popular election for the president is "impossible." A popular election would not even produce an election result in Aoun's favor, in addition to being outside the terms of the Constitution. Sfeir assessed that the extensive emigration of Christians from Lebanon would swing

BEIRUT 00000691 002 OF 002

the popular vote away from Aoun and, in fact, election of the president by popular vote could endanger the status of the presidency as a Christian institution.

17. (C) The Ambassador asked Sfeir if Aoun's supporters realized the potential repercussions of their allegiance to the General and his plan for popular elections. Sfeir said that Aoun's followers had previously felt "oppressed" and saw Aoun as their "savior." (Comment: Sfeir repeated these phrases several times as apparent justification for the willingness of FPM members to follow blindly in the General's misguided presidential aspirations. End Comment.) Sfeir admitted that only a "few wise men" see through Aoun's maneuvers.

18. (C) Moving into one of his most frequently cited concerns, Sfeir delved further into the issue of Lebanese Christian emigration at several points in the meeting. He claimed that the number of Lebanese living in Qatar had spiked from 5,000 to 30,000 in the span of a few months because of inadequate employment opportunities in Lebanon. Sfeir claimed that many of the Lebanese living in Qatar were university-educated but, unable to find work at home, moved abroad for employment. Additionally, Sfeir mentioned that 80 Maronite churches -- led by two bishops -- serve the Lebanese population in the United States.

STILL OPPOSED TO VATICAN ENVOY

19. (C) Sfeir discussed his visit to the Vatican earlier this month. He said that Vatican officials were well-briefed on the situation in Lebanon and asked what they could do to help. Sfeir said that the Vatican hesitates to send an envoy without assurance that the mission would be successful. The Patriarch described "success" as agreement among Lebanese Christians that they would support the Papal envoy's mission and any potential conclusions that arose from the mission. Sfeir asserted that if the mission were to fail or at best be

seen as not having any positive impact, a visit by Vatican envoy would be detrimental to both the Vatican and Lebanese Christians.

¶10. (C) Regarding Lebanon's current lack of political consensus, Sfeir commented that, at least, what is happening in the country is, in fact, a sign of freedom. He claimed that extended political opposition and public demonstrations, although harmful to Lebanon, would not be tolerated elsewhere in the region. The Patriarch asserted that Lebanon's mixed demographic make-up, in which Muslims and Christians live together and largely get along with each other, is extremely important and very rare in the Middle East.

GRATITUDE FOR U.S. SUPPORT

¶11. (C) Throughout the meeting, Sfeir thanked A/S Welch for generous U.S. security assistance and diplomatic attention to his country. He mentioned that he looked forward to continued contact with high-level American visitors. Additionally, Sfeir commented that an hour before his meeting with A/S Welch and the Ambassador, he had received Lebanese Armed Forces Intelligence Director General Georges Khoury, who commented that his recent visit to the United States had been successful.

COMMENT

¶12. (C) Despite turning 87 years old on the day of A/S Welch's visit, Patriarch Sfeir appears more vigorous and engaged than he had a few months ago. His basic instincts -- opposing a second government, mistrust of Aoun, wish for Lahoud to depart the scene -- are sound, so increased political interventions by the Patriarch are something to welcome. We suspect that his concern about a Vatican envoy has more to do with turf concerns and wariness of oversight than fear of a Vatican failure.

¶12. (U) This message has not been cleared by A/S Welch.
FELTMAN